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Army Reserve Combatives Instructors Ready for Next Level

Story by Staff Sgt. Ryan Matson
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FORT DIX, N.J. – Sang Truong pointed to a wall lined with rubber weapons, boxing gloves and helmets.

"When we came here, this building was empty," he said. "We didn't have any of this stuff, just an old, over-used wrestling mat and no gear. It wasn't conducive to training."

Staff Sgt. Truong, drill sergeant, a combatives instructor with Company B, Regional Training Center-East, Fort Dix, N.J., was referring to the Modern Army Combatives Building. In this building, soldiers are taught to use tactical flexibility – using offensive and defensive tactics to combat the enemy in close quarters.

Where there was once a dusty mat, a new mat, striking bags and new equipment now stand. Murals adorn the walls of a clean building that is always full of activity.

"Everything here was created by us [the instructors] and driven by the soldiers," Truong said.

He shifted his focus to a group of 21 soldiers, vigorously attacking one another. The soldiers were practicing various Army combatives moves and techniques they had learned throughout the week, in preparation for their level one certification exam later that day.

"See this?" he asked as a rare smile crossed his face. "This is what I love about being an instructor. They are teaching themselves. Four days ago, when they got on this mat, there was mass confusion. No one knew what to do."

He continued, "Look at that group over there. That soldier is sitting like a fighter, in the proper manner. The two soldiers he's helping are practicing the side mount. The group over there is practicing a rear mount, he's got an arm bar going on. The first day, there is no way they would have had the confidence to fight one another. Now I have 21 trainers in this building who can take this back to their unit."

The group of soldiers, from local towns in New Jersey, volunteered for the training after Truong and his instructors traveled to their Reserve Center for a day of combatives instruction. They're here for forty hours of instruction to attain a skill level one certification.

Training soldiers to receive their level one certification is one of two of the instructor's main duties, Truong said. The other is conducting an eight-hour combatives familiarization class for mobilizing units. More than 10,000 soldiers have received familiarization training and more than 900 have earned their level one certifications since 2008. Truong said interest and emphasis in the instruction has skyrocketed. From 2008 to 2009, for example, the number of soldiers who received familiarization training and level one certification more than tripled.

Sgt. Scott Taylor, drill sergeant, another combatives instructor assigned to Company B, RTC-East, said the training is important, especially for Reserve soldiers, because it is good, battle-focused training.

"We train Reserve soldiers who leave here and go to Iraq or Afghanistan and this training is extremely important," Taylor said. "All these soldiers interact with foreign nationals on a day-to-day basis. You never know when the situation may escalate. Soldiers need to know how to react to these situations."

Taylor, a level-two-certified instructor who hails from Chatsworth, Ga., said he became



Staff Sgt. Sang Truong, drill sergeant, foreground, a combatives instructor with Regional Training Center East, Fort Dix, N.J., provides instruction to a formation of Reserve soldiers Sept. 23. Truong has been with the RTC East combatives school since its inception in 2008 and feels the school could host a Reserve combatives academy in the near future.

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involved in combatives when he attained his mandatory level one certification in Drill Sergeant School. From that point on, he said he was instantly hooked.

"I love the fact that we're not training soldiers to go into a battlefield and drop their weapons systems and try to fight like ninjas, that's not what it's about" he said. "It's about reacting to going into a building and something happens – your weapon malfunctions, or the fight becomes too close and you can't use your primary or secondary weapons system, - you have the tools through combatives to react to those situations."

Taylor continued, "It's not one of those monotonous schools. It instills character building. I became more confident as an instructor and as a soldier through this training. I wanted to go out and deploy, and to train other soldiers in my unit immediately, because I was so motivated from the training."

The instructors became involved in the program through various means, such as Staff Sgt. Matthew Roth, drill sergeant, who works as a civilian police officer in Jackson, N.J., and has been training both police officers and Reserve Soldiers for the last five years.

The instructors say that while the program at Fort Dix has grown, they see greater training opportunities in the future. The instructors said the possibility of implementing an official, full-scale combatives academy for Reserve soldiers has been discussed by higher headquarters.

"I think a main combatives school for the Army Reserves would be amazing," Taylor said. "We have acquired about \$150,000 worth of gear – gloves, headgear, groin protectors, mits, pads, dummy weapons, blower suits, you name it. We could start fielding an official Reserve academy almost immediately."

Taylor also said they have changed the curriculum taught at the school based on feedback gained from the battlefield.

"Level one used to be primarily ground grappling," Taylor explained. "Now, based on downrange feedback from Soldiers overseas, we restructured the program. There is more stand-up fighting and some situational based training as well that has been implemented."

The importance of the training is evident in the soldiers receiving it. Pvt. David Pena, a truck driver from Company A, 533rd Battalion Support Battalion, served as the class leader for his unit while they received their level one certification.

He said he feels confident he can defend himself should he become disarmed in a combat situation. He added he gained confidence during a clinch drill earlier in the week where soldiers needed to take punches from the instructors in to simulate gaining a hold on the enemy.

"Not everyone had hand-to-hand experience with taking punches to the face," Pena said. "That showed the confidence of everyone here; that we were willing to take a couple punches to the face without returning them to get that clinch. Everyone, including myself, was nervous, but we knew we had to keep going. Before this week, I wouldn't have volunteered to do that."

Pena said after going through the training, he now has an appreciation of why combatives is important to any soldier.

"Troops rely on their weapons, and the enemy may be right there, and if your weapon were to jam on you, what would you do?" Pena said. "If an unarmed enemy jumps out on you and grabs you, you need to know how to take him out with your hands."

It appeared the instructors had accomplished their mission – to make Reserve soldiers a better fighting force through combatives training.